

Interviewed by Lucille Brown
Miami Beach, Florida
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Morris (Moishe) Wax remembers his father as a pious man who was a little "progressive" for his times. Before World War I, he'd had a thriving atelier making the latest Paris fashions for the landowner ladies in their district. World war came, then the Russian Civil War, chaos, starvation, and pogroms. Morris' father died in 1922 as a result of the injuries inflicted on him by pogromchiks. With no father to provide for them, Morris, his mother and sister hoped to join an older brother and sister in the United States. They were able to get to Antwerp, Belgium where they awaited passage to the United States. While in Antwerp, the U.S. passed the Immigration Act of 1924 limiting the number of Jews, along with other groups, who could enter the country. Morris' mother was allowed to go. Her two teenage children stayed in Antwerp for three more years.

MW: My name is Morris Wax, W-A-X. The reason I emphasize that, because there's Waxes of different spelling. There's W-A-C-K-S.

LB: Where were you born?

MW: Russia...Ukraine.

LB: In the Ukraine. What town?

MW: Chashwato. Hash-va-to we call now. Instead of the "e", you put a "o" and be Chashwato. This is Chashwater young man. (Note: We found it spelled Khashchuvatye)

LB: And what was the nearest city to you?

MW: The nearest, the biggest was Odessa. And then we had other big cities like Uman, Geisen was our uyezd at one time. Like here, Albany and New York- you know, the capital. The uyezd before I left, yet after the Revolution is Vinnitsa where Kauffman comes from.

LB: Yes, my parents too. They come from the same shtetl.

MW: From shtetl not far from Vinnitsa?

LB: Right. What is the meaning of uyezd?

MW: Uyezd is the state.

LB: It's a state? Because you have an oblast. So you came from the Vinnitsa Uyezd.

MW: Oh, you come from Vinnitsa? I made my documents, I made my passport in Vinnitsa in 1923. I was there three months waiting for a piece of paper; for a little passport they made.

LB: So was Matty (another family friend), too, wasn't he?

MW: No, he came before me. He came here, I think he told me 1912. In 1923 I was already six years under the Soviets.

LB: You were born in 1905 in Charsh-a-va-ter

MW: Chashwato (Spelled Khashchuvatye on 2018 maps). That's right, yeah.

LB: Was this just a shtetl?

MW: A shtetl, that's right.

LB: How many families?

MW: I could never get to the bottom of it. How many families were we there? I know it wasn't big, but yet it was a nice little shtetl, you know. People lived their life like in any ordinary shtetl in the Ukraine, or in White Russia, or whatever it is. But, how big it is, actually, I really cannot give you a number. (Note: According to Jewishgen.org, the Jewish population of Khashchuvatye, Ukraine in 1900 was 3,266 and 3,170 in 1926).

LB: Not even a guess?

MW: A guess. Well, I would say maybe we were three, four hundred families. I don't want to pinpoint myself to a number. And I'm trying to find out. I'm looking for [landsleiter](#) much older than myself. And I say: "Zug mir". (Tell me)

LB: Tell me. That's all right. I can translate. I know Yiddish.

MW: "Zug mir. Vie fiel haben mir dorten gerehn?" (How many were we?) No, if he doesn't know, I don't know either. But it was small.

LB: "Tell me how many we were." And he didn't, nobody knows. So, in other words, it's sort of like anybody's guess?

MW: That's right. It wasn't big, let me put it that way. It was small enough that everybody knew each other. It was like... one, happy family. And everybody knew everybody else's [tsuris](#). It was different. It's not like we lived here in one apartment in the Bronx eighteen years. Our son was one year old when we moved in and when we moved out he was nineteen and I knew as many people there when I moved in eighteen years ago. That was the case in the Bronx, you know. But back home, everybody knew who you are, why you are, when you going where. That's the way life was. It was nice, provincial, little, small Ukrainian town.

LB: You liked it there.

MW: Well, it's not... Could I define "like it". I mean, I was brought up, born and raised there. That was life for me. Naturally, if I left the [shtetl](#) and came to bigger towns and began to understand life a little different. Life was different to me and then I could make a comparison; an evaluation. Naturally, when I reminisce, I liked the time there, because there where you grew, there where you had our base, you know. Naturally, it was nothing, until they start killing and robbing us and all that. It was a nice little shtetl. I didn't know any different. I couldn't make at that time, a comparison, say, "Well, I like Odessa better," I'd never been to Odessa. You understand.

LB: Yes, I do.

MW: Yeah. So, uh, naturally, you live with the dream of the shtetl. But, when you leave the shtetl, naturally, I left, I was a young boy. I was not quite 18 years old. And that's when a life...went through a lot. You look back and if you come out from a little shtetl like that, and you're able to adjust your life... and then we were coming over to this country. We were three

years in Belgium. At that time it was a quota system. When we get our passport to leave the Soviet Union, I suppose we missed a quota within a couple of weeks, or so, when we got to Belgium. So we had to wait. I traveled with my mother, may she rest in peace, and another sister. So she left about a year and a half later, and we were there another year and a half, so we were three years before we came. We came here in 1926. We left in 1923. It took us three years. We could have done it hitchhiking, walking. Three years to get here. But it was nice, the three years we were in Belgium, too. There, too, I enjoyed life. It was different. Also, we lived in a Jewish environment. I remember, in [Antwerp](#), we lived there, was a Sommerstrasse, and there most of the Jewish people lived. I mean, people that had bake shops, shoe repair shops and all that little, Jewish people that had nothing to do with the diamond industry. They weren't the rich people. The middle class, the lower middle class... and was not far from the diamond Bourse where the diamond industry was. So we lived there for three years and I worked for the baker when I came. When we settled down we knew that we have to stay there. So every young boy looked to get a job; to do something, although we didn't earn much. We were supported by our brother and sister here, but everybody worked. I never worked in my life, so I figured I'll want to be one of the boys. So, I got a job by the baker and I pushed a pushcart with bread, rolls, delivery. And then I got a little promoted, you know. I wanted to get a little better job; graded myself up to earn a few pennies more, so I worked for the butcher... on a bike, hand delivering the orders, the meat... a basket in front.

LB: How many people were in your family back in your home shtetl?

MW: When you say, how many people in the immediate family...?

LB: How many lived in your home?

MW: In our home? Well, going back when I was maybe five or six years old, I remember we lost one of our sisters. And then the oldest sister and a brother, they came here.

LB: What year did they come here?

MW: I think in 1922.

LB: They came after the Soviets.

MW: 1921

LB: But it was after the [Soviets](#)?

MW: Yes, because immediately as soon as they came here, our father died in 1922. So immediately they started working at papers to take us out because if my father wouldn't die, we would have never got here because he wouldn't let us go, you know. He let the first two go, and he wouldn't let go, naturally, my younger sister and myself. But being we lost a father, so they immediately took us out. That's why we were able to leave in 1923. We lost our father in 1922. In 1923 we left.

LB: So you had three sisters, one of whom died about 1910. So there were two sisters and two brothers, essentially?

MW: Yeah.

LB: And a mother and a father.

MW: And a father. There was quite a few before. I'm the youngest.

LB: You're the youngest... you're the baby.

MW: I'm the baby in the family, yes. But there was quite a few before that died. But I remember only the one that died when I was five or six years old.

LB: Now in this little shtetl of about 400 families, what kind of schooling did you have?

MW: The basic schooling was the cheder. The rabbi.

LB: Did every boy go to cheder?

MW: I would say so. I mean, I don't want to make a firm statement, but I would say there wasn't a kid that didn't start with cheder. So did I with the others. But we did have a four class gymnasium.

LB: Well, I want to stay up to the beginning of the War because otherwise you get into another kind of problem. You get into another world, actually. So you went to cheder. That would be from about 1910 when you were five?

MW: Five or six, I don't remember. It was very young. You have to be very young.

LB: And you went to cheder how many years? Were you still going to cheder when the war broke out?

MW: The war broke out in 1914. No.

LB: You were already in the gymnasium?

MW: Yeah, in the beginning. I remember it was a problem of having my father consent to it because in a small shtetl, the gymnasia, you had to violate the Sabbath. Because you were a half a day at school.

LB: Right and writing on the Sabbath.

MW: Right, but my father happened to be, as I remember, a little progressive, you know. And he said: "If you want to go, if you feel you have a desire to go, you go."

LB: He let you go.

MW: Yes. Didn't go there too long either, because we immediately got into the revolution and pogroms.

LB: Before the Revolution, was your family a religious one? Was it pious?

MW: They weren't fanatic. They were just simple, nice, obedient Jews, you know. The Sabbath was a Sabbath, the Yontov was a yontov. But I never seen my father in the house without a yarmulke - sitting down to the table to have his meal..

LB: He always wore it when he ate?

MW: Yes, my father was a tailor and had people working for him, you know. He was a ladies' tailor. But I never seen him walking around like Tevye der milchiker. No, I never see him miss a Sabbath to go to services Friday night and Saturday morning.

LB: Both.

MW: Like every traditional Jew would obey his Yontov and Shabbos.

LB: Did the boys go with him?

MW: The brother was older. I remember, I went with him most of the time. In fact, in a klein shtetl, there was a certain distance that you could walk on the Sabbath, and then you cannot walk and you cannot carry nothing with you. I was the one that was carrying his tallis because we had quite a distance to reach the synagogue. So, I went with them. And then he sensed that I was not

so keen about going ... My father was progressive, so he told me: "My son, as long as I hold your hand and go with you, you go with me wherever I lead you. When you form your own opinion, when you grow up you have a basic mind and you feel that you don't want to go to a synagogue, don't ever walk in. Never say that your father told you you must go there." And I'll never forget it. He spoke to me like a mature man. But he said, "As long as you're young enough that I have to go with you, you come with me where I go." And so that's why I always admire my father's philosophy of life.

LB: You do?

MW: For a small, little town man, you know. So, he said, you feel you must go... and you mustn't if you feel you don't want it.

LB: Your father was a tailor?

MW: Ladies' tailor. But he catered to the elite in the surrounding area. We had shoe refineries and all that. And they had big people in big *promichikas*, you know... The rich peasants, and all that. He was their tailor, that's why we were considered a well-to-do family of tailors; well-to-do family among the immediate family. And naturally among the brothers and sisters, and Chaim Schneider; in Yiddish, a rich man. Because usually, the tailor, the shoemaker, the cabinetmaker were poor people. My father was an exception and the shtetl was small enough that he was an exception. There couldn't have been two in his street to enjoy that leisure that my father had. There was one man's tailor also outstanding, so also wasn't a poor man.

LB: But there were other tailors in the town?

MW: Oh, yeah, yeah. Most of the immediate family, like blood relations, you know, like my father's brother and a brother in law and all, they're all tailors.

LB: But none of them had the prestige that he had?

MW: No, no. I mean, the comfort, the financial wealth...

LB: Tell me about the house that you lived in.

MW: Very nice.

LB: Can you describe it? Was it stone, for example? Was it wood?

MW: No, it was built special when... we moved into that house where I left. I was one year old. And in fact the house is still our house because, when we left, we had quite a few pieces of

property and the shtetl had one drugstore and a little cosmetics store where they call them *aptekas*, (pharmacy or drugstore) what they call them, *magazin* (store). But a drugstore, legitimate drugstore was built by my father to specification. It wasn't a house and you put shelves in and you call it a drugstore. That was built. And it was leased to a druggist. Because my father was the tailor. But the property, built and everything was ours you know. And around that was a couple of homes built, that's where we lived and another relative lived...

LB: So he was also in real estate?

MW: I didn't realize that...

LB: When you were just talking to me...

MW: You could have called that so. But, we had a beautiful home.

LB: How beautiful?

MW: Well, nicer than this. I mean maybe the rooms were a little smaller, but more comfort. For a small town.

LB: This is a lovely place.

MW: Yeah, but I mean, it was...one of the nicest.

LB: How many stories? One story?

MW: One, one.

LB: How many rooms?

MW: Well, the front room was a very big room; it was bigger than this. For the time that we had to work it was called "the shop". You could work in it. You worked down there. And then we had a big room where the clientele used to come and they would look at... my father would import [fashion magazines from Paris](#) three, four times a year, when new fashions would come in. That's how he would sell to...

LB: It's a salon, and people would look at materials and ...

MW: Yes, and that's why he was able to charge whatever he felt. And that was a beautiful room with mirrors and all that. And then was a big master bedroom.

LB: For your mother and father.

MW: Yeah. And there was a *dyetska*- it's a children's room. "*Deti*" is children, you know. I would sleep there and my younger sister would sleep there. And then, in the big room where they used to work, there was also room to sleep in the evening, you know. And there was a kitchen with a big stove that we used to bake our own challah, our own bread, cook all the meals. And then there was a couple of storage rooms outside where we used to chop up the wood to heat the apartment in the winter. We had to chop various sizes of wood and line them and we all had that and we all were prepared for that. That constituted comfort, you know, to put in the stove and we had it prepared season for season. There was no shortage of that. There was no shortage of flour to bake the challah or the bread. That was all in normal times, for the [Czar](#), I'm talking to you. And that's why when father passed away, I sold the building where the drugstore was and I sold the other house, and there was an unfinished house that I gave away. And then my brother said: "Never, never." Couldn't sell for much anyway because... He said, "Never sell the house where we lived. Let it be a shrine for Father." You know, when they pass by they say, "This is Chaim Schneider's house." So I left it. And it's there. I know ten years ago it was still there. Because we lived on the Bug River. So the little town was actually destroyed.

LB: You were on the Bug?

MW: On the [Bug](#) that goes into the Black Sea. In fact, the people that used to go to bathe in the Bug had to pass our street. And you would sit on the terrace - by us it's called a *balcone*- like here the terrace, and see the people go with a towel to the Bug to bathe.

LB: I just wonder if it's on this map. Here's the Bug.

MW: I know, but our little town is not listed because it's so small.

LB: This is Poland and you might be further east. You're further into the Ukraine.

MW: Yeah, because the Bug from us goes right into the Black Sea, to Odessa.

LB: So you're further south. You're down here someplace. You're not on this map, actually, but this is your river.

MW: But our [shtetl is never, never listed](#). It's very, so small.

LB: I understand. All right. So you had this house. Some people have told me if their father was a tailor, and a lot of people come from tailoring families, the work was done in the kitchen.

MW: No, not by us. By us in the kitchen was only done the cooking and baking.

LB: So that's what made it a high class establishment, actually?

MW: Yeah, well, that's why when I say that people usually in a small shtetl are so religious that for the Sabbath they make [cholent](#). They put everything in, in the stove and it bakes there and it stays there and on Sabbath they don't have to make the fire, and they eat. Now, we never had cholent because we always had a maid.

LB: That's what I was going to ask next.

MW: Yeah, we always had a maid. In fact, on a Saturday morning there was a tradition that the uncles would come and have tea and cookies in our house in the morning. And from us they would all go to shul. Why? Because we had the maid to make the [samovar](#).

LB: So she was not a Jew, the maid?

MW: No, no. And if you didn't have that, there was a place where you could go and buy for a kopeck or two kopecks, a little hot water on a Sabbath, you know, and have tea. But that was a family tradition that they (the uncles) came to us. They had the morning tea and whatever, [pletzlach](#) or moon cookies. And from us they would go to the Sabbath services.

LB: Did the maid live in? Did she live in your house or did she just come every day?

MW: No, she would live in, because in the *dyetska* was a place for a maid to sleep, too.

LB: So she slept in the children's room? And what was she? What kind of non-Jews were surrounding you? Did you have Ukrainians or Russians or...?

MW: Ukrainian only. Our section is strictly Ukrainian territory.

LB: During the time that you were growing up and before the War...

MW: Before 1914

LB: Right. You were a little boy, going to school and so on. Your father was making fashionable clothing and making a good income.

MW: Yes, good income, yes.

LB: He made them for Jews and for non-Jews?

MW: I would say mostly, ninety nine percent for Gentiles. Because the Jew in town, maybe... very rarely I would see that a Jewish family could afford my father's fee. All I knew, that they used to come, the *pritzim*, the *puritzers*, you know the one that has a lot of land.

LB: The landowners.

MW: Landowners would come with their [phaeton](#), what is it?

LB: Carriages.

MW: Beautiful carriages. And some of them would come with four horses. Two and two. And they would line up in the front of the house. And we had a beautiful front house with acacia trees. Beautiful in the summer when the acacia used to bloom, you know. It was like a flower of snow around the house. And we had cherry trees in the back. So they used to come up for their fittings and all that. And it was picturesque to me as a kid. I remember, you know. I used to come in sometimes from cheder, for lunch. There you go to cheder and you went home for lunch. And I would see the *durshkelach*, the phaeton and all that. And it looked so nice. Beautiful, you know.

LB: Ladies.

MW: Ladies, only ladies.

LB: Your father essentially worked mostly for gentiles?

MW: Yes, I would say that.

LB: But his social life?

MW: Only among Jews.

LB: Only among Jews?

MW: That's right, among our own people.

LB: He didn't have any friends among the gentiles?

MW: No, he had friends as an associate in business might have, but if he needed something... For instance, like I said to my friend the other day, "Everything was good up to the Revolution; up to the turn of the events", you know. And then, actually, when there was nothing to eat we

were starving for a piece of bread as good as anybody else. Even if you had a ten carat diamond to trade for a loaf of bread, you couldn't. And you couldn't chew on a diamond, either.

LB: Before the War, the relations between Jews and non-Jews, what were they like?

MW: Well, by us, in a small town, you had anti-Semitism there. But maybe you won't feel it. A man like my father probably felt it a little less than the other Jews because he mingled with them, he worked for them. They had to respect him because the wife liked my father's clothing, my father's workmanship. So I never felt that he came home with a little bit of bitterness. He was always coming home with respect. I mean, if he had to see one of the big men there, and they say that my father wants to see him, he could reach him when the other, ordinary Jew in town could not get near the man. So we did not feel any anti-Semitism as much probably as some of the others. Because there was anti-Semitism.

LB: How did you know it, then?

MW: Well, let me tell you. I knew it.

LB: How did you know it?

MW: I did know it, and I'll tell you. The reason I say I knew it is because when you mingled with the children of the city and with friends and all that, you would hear the remarks that they were abused or they were beaten or they were... something. Something was done to them that wasn't done to me. So I knew there is. Now I realize at that time it probably by-passed me. Nobody bothered me, nobody hit me, nobody ran after me and nobody insulted me. But the others- the kids that we played with occasionally, would tell me what he went through because through us you had to go to a village just within a walking distance. You go from the Jewish section into the Gentile section. And if the Jew would pass from one village to the other he would be abused, he would be beaten, they would have dogs chase him. You know, the ordinary anti-Semitism.

LB: To you it's ordinary, but it's not ordinary to us here. That's why I want you to explain it. To us, here in the United States, it's not ordinary. If we want to go from one town to another, they, as a rule, don't set the dogs on us.

MW: Right. I know this. That's the way life was there. I mean, you were so immune to it - that's the way life was. I mean, you weren't surprised if a little boy my age would tell me that he played in the other side of the town or had to go somewhere and he was beaten up by a few gentile *shkutzim*. Nothing. I mean, it was just another event. You took it as part of life. Here I wouldn't take it either. This land is something else. But I'm just telling you the way you felt

over there. It didn't upset me because we expected it. That's the way it has to be; that's the way it was, rather.

LB: Did any of the Jewish boys ever beat up on the *shkutzim*?

MW: Well, I would say in our little surroundings, very, very seldom. I would say we were cowards, most of us. Some other towns, I was told, they did resist; they did fight back. Because, in our town, when we came to the pogroms and all that, it was only a matter one gentile *shaygetz* come and scare the people to death. And everybody would run for shelter. So I would say that we weren't organized, or we didn't have the right youth.

LB: Well, you were also a very small town.

MW: But, I mean there were small towns that when time came, they fought back. I don't know how much good they did for themselves, but at least people respected them for that. We didn't have it. We just ran, ran to the cellar.

LB: There was nothing other than this occasional setting the dogs on you or calling a name or an occasional beating? Was there anything like an organized pogrom before the revolution?

MW: Not that I could recall. Was just local little mischief going. But nothing organized before the revolution. Not that I recall any.

LB: Were there any churches in your neighborhood?

MW: There was one, as I said, in the city.

LB: What kind of church? Do you remember?

MW: An [Orthodox Church](#), you know.

LB: It was a Greek Orthodox?

MW: Yeah.

LB: Because some people had Polish, Catholic...

MW: That were the people lived near to Poland, around there. But we had just the Greek Orthodox Church, whatever they call it at that time.

LB: Somebody told me something interesting. They said that they were taught that when they passed the church [they had to spit](#).

MW: I was told so, too, but I don't. I never exercised that, but I don't remember seeing it. All I knew, when we passed the church, we had to take off our hats.

LB: That was a rule, a law?

MW: No, I mean, that was the respect for the church. So, like the gentile used to go past his house of worship, he would take up his *kutchma* - his hat- he would take it off. And so we figured that's another way not to disrespect their church. As a kid, I remember, we used to pass sometimes. If I wore something, if it was on a cold day or whatever it is, I would take it off. But I don't remember spitting in the front of a church. I never witnessed anybody else do that. But I was told.

LB: Who told you?

MW: In town...

LB: Oh, you mean you heard it.

MW: Yeah, but I ever witnessed that.

LB: And the taking off of the hat was not a law or a rule?

MW: No, it was just a respect, you know.

LB: Could it have been fear? That you didn't want to incur displeasure?

MW: Maybe, maybe.

LB: Was there any special feeling, like before Christmas or Easter? Was there any special tension amongst the Jews?

MW: Not that I recall. In fact it was like holiday spirit. I know my father would be very busy with the *pritzim* (landowners), the clothes and all that. But it wasn't a feeling of fear or something. Not that I could recall. Not from my time. Not for us. Maybe other people had fears.

LB: Now, comes the war. In 1914, you're 9 years old. And you're beginning gymnasium, right?

MW: I think so. I think it was around that year.

LB: What happens in your town during the War? Before the Revolution.

MW: What happens? I know that War reached our town, where it was declared on the same day or- no- reached our town in a Sabbath. When they and all those people that were called into service to go to the War, had to leave in Shabbos, you know, had to. Because we had a little train passing our town. Most of the Jewish little towns didn't have it. They had to go to a different town to reach a train, you know. We had a train passing our town. A *stanzi*, you know, like a train stop. And all those recruits or whatever you call them, or people that were making the services for the Czar, they had to go, I think, for three years. Between 21 and 24 you had to be trained to serve the Czar in the army. Anyway, in a Shabbos, I recall that everybody went to the *stanzi* to say goodbye to their relatives. I remember that day. It was like you would call a Yom Kippur day. Everybody, naturally, was crying. Their husband was leaving, their brother was leaving, their uncle was leaving. That was the beginning of the War, and I remember the first day when the first recruits had left the *stanzi*. And I ran, it was quite in the outskirts of the city - it wasn't right in the middle of the town, because if you had to go to the station, you had to go by wagon or by phaeton whatever it is. But I ran with. And I saw the emotion, the heart breaking and all that. And ever since then, I mean, the War started to roll in, you know. And people had to go and people lost one of the nearest and the dearest and that's the way it was. That was 1914. And within the three years, a lot of chaos.

LB: Was your father's business affected?

MW: My father's business affected? In the first couple years, it really would be hard for me to paint for you that, at the age of nine or ten, you know. But he was working.

LB: There was enough food to eat?

MW: Until the Revolution, yes.

LB: So things went on. You knew there was a war. You knew people were getting killed, including Jewish boys and Jewish men. But otherwise, relations between the Jews and gentiles remained fairly stable.

MW: Yes.

LB: Food was to be had, as far as you were concerned, and that's all we're talking about now. And life went on as before.

MW: That's right.

LB: Did any of your [brothers have to go](#)?

MW: Yeah, he had to go, I think, he had to go in the later part of the war. The beginning of the war, I don't... All I know is that my older sister that was older than the brother, the brother who has now passed away, said that he will never go, she'll bring him back. Because you had to go for a physical checkup and all that. And she went with him, and all that, and she brought him back. I mean he got a ... I don't know for what reason, a little..

LB: Did he get the white ticket, or - wait- I forget which one was which. There was a blue ticket and a white ticket. Matty told me.

MW: Yeah, there was a certain color. They had green, or whatever it is, or white. He was let go for a couple of months and then he would have to report again. Because a white ticket, that means you don't have to report no more, you're free.

LB: Right, you're too sick.

MW: Yea, but she took him there and back there.

LB: You don't know what happened though?

MW: No, he didn't go.

LB: I know, but you don't know how come?

MW: No, no, no, no.

LB: Is it possible that she bribed the officials?

MW: No, he had back home when the winter used to set in, the frost was severe and he had a frozen finger (toe?), I think. I mean he had a frozen finger and she made sure that the frozen finger will play a big part because he wouldn't be able to walk, he wouldn't be able to wear the boots, you know. Anyway, I think that was part of her aim how to get him out of it. She brought him back.

LB: Now comes the Revolution as we say. First of all, by 1917 you were 12.

MW: That's right.

LB: What kind of reading and studying were you doing?

MW: Well, little at that time. We used to go to the so-called gymnasia. But soon after that, when the Revolution set in and all the chaos started you couldn't heat the class. It was very cold. You couldn't get the teachers because they were all hungry. And it sort of faded away, you know.

LB: School faded away?

MW: Yeah, you were sort of on your own. If you could do something home, yourself, study or through a friend or through a cousin, or whatever it is, that's about what it was. I mean, you couldn't get a normal curriculum, a normal education in those years. And then, every year, every few months, it got worse. The pogroms set in, so naturally you couldn't go. And then the change in government between the Bolsheviks and the White Guards, you know. [Dinekin](#), [Kolchak](#). You know, in and out. And kept us in terror all the time.

LB: Were you at all interested in socialist movements, before the Revolution came?

MW: Well, I was too young. Yet I lived under that indoctrination for six years. Between 1917 and 1923.

LB: I'm talking about before it happened; were you aware?

MW? No, no, no. All I was aware, I'm a Jewish boy.

LB: Were you a Zionist at all?

MW: No.

LB: And you didn't know, or hear any talk?

MW: No, I did know. I know that the...

LB: You'd heard of [Herzl](#)?

MW: That's what I want to say. My father used to observe Herzl's [yahrtzeit](#), you know, when he died. That was like a tradition of Jewish life in a small shtetl.

LB: Well, some Jews were against [Zionism](#), if they were orthodox enough and...

MW: No, no. My father probably was not. He wasn't a pious, a religious Orthodox Jew, but he was a typical Jew, you know, that everything was Jewish.

LB: The Czar is overthrown and that's in February of 1917 and Kerensky's government came in.

MW: I remember that.

LB: What do you remember about it?

MW: I remember that time there was a fashion. [Kerensky used to dress](#) in a certain jacket and it was called "kerensky", you know. And my brother - at that time already you couldn't get no piece goods; couldn't get nothing to... - so they used to take an old garment and turn it upside down and make the best of it. And I remember my mother gave something of a coat that she used to wear to my brother. And I had an uncle that was a man's tailor and he recycled that to make it a kerensky fashion for my older brother. And he wore it and that was the fashion of the day. And then, Kerensky issued money.

LB: Yes, there was a [Kerensky ruble](#).

MW: That was blocks, little blocks like that. And the denomination was 20 rubles and 40. There was 2...

LB: They were smaller than the Czar rubles, is that what you're saying? In size.

MW: Yeah, yeah, in size. But they used to [come in blocks](#), you know. In big sheets.

LB: Like stamps.

MW: And you had to cut them up like coupons, sort of. But that was the money. That was the currency that Kerensky issued. And I also remember that, for some reason, my father had a lot of the Kerensky money; I mean twenties and forties, you know. And after Kerensky there were [Petlura](#)...

LB: I know. He was a Ukrainian nationalist.

MW: That's right. Petlura came in and he, too, issued a currency and that was called *lopataki*.

LB: L-o-p-a-t-a-k-i?

MW: Yeah. *Lopatki* means like a little shovel. A *lopata* is a shovel. And for what reason they were called *lopatki*, I don't know. But I mean they were 50... I remember 50 rubles.

LB: When Petlura issued this currency, was that when the Ukraine ceded from the rest of Russia and became a national republic on its own?

MW: Well, he never succeeded at making... he was only trying it. That's right. And that's why most of our people in our town got killed by Petlurovsta, you know, when they ran from town to town. But he succeeded of having his own currency. For how long, I don't know.

LB: But that was after the Bolsheviks came? Was not Petlura after the Bolsheviks were already in?

MW: Yeah, but they were in and out. They were never established yet.

LB: But I mean that Petlura, himself, did not really come to prominence until after the second revolution. Is that correct?

MW: Right, right, right.

LB: So under Kerensky, did your father have any opinion about Kerensky?

MW: I wouldn't know. All I remember, that Kerensky was short-lived.

LB: A lot of Jews had very strong feeling pro-Kerensky. They felt times were going to change and that things would be better for them. Do you remember any of this?

MW: No, no, no. I remember only, seeing Kerensky, hearing him when I was here already. I saw him twice.

LB: Yeah, but I'm talking about there.

MW: There, no.

LB: So, actually your memory of Kerensky was only about the jacket?

MW: Yeah, that's right, because we were far. In the Ukraine. Provincial, away from central news and all that. Even though, they tell me now, what I said in the beginning, that Odessa is our biggest metropolis. They tell me now, if you come to Odessa and you want to go to Khashchuvatye, you could go five, six hours by car. Well, it was quite near, but for my time it was a distance away. Very far. I used to go by the small train; I went to Odessa before I left the Soviet Union. I went a few times. But it was a whole production. I had to travel for 24 hours.

LB: So then the Kerensky government falls and in October the Bolsheviks take over Leningrad and then they take over Moscow. Did you know about that?

MW: Well, probably. I can't recall details, and that's what happened. To us it reached only pogroms because, to us when they took over Leningrad and Moscow, nothing happened yet in the provinces except killing Jews.

LB: When did that start in your town?

MW: In our town it started between '18 and '19. You know the slogan was: "*Byeh Jhidov, spassy Rassiar*". You know, "Kill the Jews and save Russia."

LB: Say it slowly.

MW: *Byeh Jhidov*

LB: *Byeh* is "to kill"

MW: No, "*byeh*" is *schlugen*... to beat. *Spassy* is save. Russia.

LB: *Rassiar*.

MW: Yeah. That was the slogan.

LB: Was that a Ukrainian slogan or a Russian slogan?

MW: I would say it was a Russian slogan because in the Ukraine, Russian was probably the dominating language. But Ukraine had their own language and the peasants spoke mostly Ukraine. The little more civilized, you know, the...

LB: Educated...

MW: ... the students that went out of town to school and so on, spoke Russian. You know, it's like in Belgium, when we lived. Belgium has the native tongue, Flemish, but ninety nine percent speak French.

LB: Just as an aside, did you speak Russian? You spoke Yiddish at home, right?

MW: Yes.

LB: Did you know Ukrainian and Russian?

MW: No, I knew Ukraine... little. Nothing to speak of. And, actually, Russian I knew a little bit better. But I learned more outside of Russia when I left Russia.

LB: Is that right?

MW: The kids we associated with and we met in Belgium and all that, a lot of Russian speaking youth, you know, from Kiev, and from other towns. We lived together in Belgium and all that. And here, I learned more Russian outside my native land than I knew when I left Russia.

LB: The pogroms started about 1918, which is about when the civil war started. How did it affect your town?

MW: It affected us very bitterly because we didn't have an established government, even an overnight government. It took time, you know. The Bolsheviks came in - they couldn't establish themselves; they were driven out. So, all they needed is one anti-Semite that had a little bitterness, that he could speak, he could reach his people... again. And he would organize two, three more *shkutzim*, you know, and they would come in and they would just rob and kill and that's it. Like you asked me about the church. We had at that time, when the pogroms runned, the Father of the church was a young, young man that used to be sort of friendly with a man that owned the apteka, the proviso.

LB: The pharmacy.

MW: The licensed pharmacist. My father leased it to them, you know. Now, the building was big. It was made special for a drugstore. It wasn't taking a home and make into a drugstore. It was built for a drugstore under the architect's supervision and all that. So we had basements and sub-basements and other sub-basements, for medication and all that. And we had a laboratory there that they used to filter the water; make purified water for medicine and all that. Now, if you learn to live with terror, people learn to make secrets, you know, where to hide yourself in case of an emergency. Well, I thought at that time...

LB: Which time?

MW: When the pogroms were on. And we lived in our own home, but the couple - the pharmacist and his wife- did not have any children and they were always in fear, so they asked us to go over to them and stay with them. There were plenty of rooms there.

LB: The pharmacist was a Jew?

MW: Yes. Yeah yeah. So we were there and once I walked down to the basement, to the sub-basement. And they had a lot of boxes from medications that used to come in from years back, that they used to keep them. Sometimes they used them for wood. But I said to myself: "If I cover up the wall with boxes, where there's an opening to a sub-basement and make an especial... in the opening three boxes that would pull out. And you could run in there in an emergency and cover the opening. Whoever's gonna come in will see just a covered wall with boxes and wouldn't think that people are..." And that's the way it was. That's the way people used to save themselves. And the neighbors next to us knew already that we have a shelter. Now, I know it's a shelter. At that time I didn't even know what I was doing. And they used to run in any little commotion, they would run down to the basement, pull out those three boxes, run into the sub-basement, cover themselves up. And they would manage to survive.

LB: These are your Jewish neighbors?

MW: Yeah. Now one day... We had a sugar refinery it's not far from home. And we had people that we knew. And I said to my sister or, at that time, or my brother, that I'm gonna go to the sugar refinery and stay with some friends there.

LB: This was during the pogrom period?

MW: Yeah, during pogrom period. So I left. It was only - we used to walk there - five minutes.

LB: You were about 13 years old then?

MW: Yeah. Approximately. Now, during the night the priest would ring the bell. It was in our drugstore in normal time would be 24 hour service. I mean it wasn't open, but you could ring the bell and get a prescription filled during the night if there was an emergency. And the bell rang, so naturally, most of them ran down to the cellar and took the shelter there. The druggist, himself answered the bell and asked who it was and the priest said that's him. And he let him in. And he killed him.

LB: Who? The priest killed the pharmacist?

MW: Yeah, because he didn't go to the shelter. Not only did he kill him, not with a bullwhip, but he chopped him up to pieces. Chopped him up. That's it. That was the tragedy.

LB: Did he do that all by himself?

MW: Yes. Came in with a sabre and just sliced him to pieces. They didn't have no children. I mentioned to you, didn't have no children. But she loved cats. So she had a couple of kittens there. Now, after the funeral and when they put the store together, you know, because I suppose it must have, disarray, or so, they found part of his body that the kittens dragged away under the shelves or whatever it is. And that's how that man lost his life.

LB: That's incredible.

MW: That's it. That's it. And I was lucky not to be witness. I'll never forget that.

LB: The priest, to walk in like that. At least if he was a hooligan or something.

MW: Oh, he must have been. That's what they say. He must have been.

LB: It wasn't even a band.

MW: Chopped him up to pieces. Just, literally speaking.

LB: But the rest of your family was down in the cellar?

MW: I think so. They all were safe. He was the only victim. There was quite a few people from the neighbors, as I said. They all ran down and used that shelter that I improvised for them. As a covered wall. He didn't even make an attempt to look for anybody else. That was his victim. And that's what it was.

LB: What year was that? About 1918?

MW: '19, around that.

LB: Because the World War was already over. But the civil war was still on.

MW: The one war had nothing to do with the other. I mean, we suffered when everybody was at ease already. Because we were so, so isolated at that time. Maybe now it's closer. Now, you could reach each other in no time. But at that time...

LB: There wouldn't be anybody to come, anyway.

MW: Yeah. But I mean, it was a miserable life.

LB: Were there bands that came through, too?

MW: The bandits, you mean, the group?

LB: Yes. Did they come to your little...?

MW: Most of in the surrounding villages. Yeah. In fact, there was one of them that I remember from school, from the gymnasium, but he was older than myself. He was probably in the fourth grade. There was a four grade gymnasium. And one time when the Bolsheviks came, the *rev troika*, the tribunal, came and tried to clean house a little. So they caught six of the group that used to come and terrorize and kill whomever they want. One of them was this boy that I knew by face from school. Not that we were friends, because he was so much bigger. And we used to have market days when the peasants would come Sunday, marketing from the surrounding villages. That was one market day. And then, Tuesday would be a market day. Every Tuesday the peasant, if they didn't come Sunday for marketing, would come Tuesday. But that Sunday, when they came was the tribunal. They caught the six boys and the tribunal, naturally, was investigating them and all that. And the tribunal decided they should be executed by firing squad. Sunday, after the mid-day, they felt that the marketing was almost done, and the peasants would be ready to take his horse and buggy and go back to the village. All the people to go to the *ploshet*, go to where like the city hall is. And they put the six boys against the wall. And one of them read the protocol, read the verdict that to be executed. And six Red Army soldiers were facing, one against each other. Six to be executed, six with rifles to carry out the order.

LB: Were you there to see it?

MW: Right. I wouldn't do that now if they would kill me, but at that time, I wanted to stay right near the soldiers, you know. And he read the verdict that the tribunal says they're to be shot by firing squad. And he gave the order: "Shoot!" "Rastriat!" That means shoot. And one sound came out. I'll never forget it. I couldn't do that if my life would depend on it, to witness that. And they were tied two together so were three couples. And one sound came and they fell like a ton of bricks would fall on them. And one of them picked his head up - that means he wasn't killed instantly. The human law says that you must kill him; mustn't let him suffer. So they gave him another. And years later, then it didn't impress me because every day this one was

killed, this one... But years later I said to myself, "That little it takes to lose life? The snap of a finger?" I'll never forget it, but yet I witnessed it.

LB: And yet, what had these boys done?

MW: They were bandits. They were terrorizing the little towns, because we weren't the only little city. There were other little cities. And in a village where at times used to be a little community of Jews that lived in the village were also terrorized. But I witnessed a firing squad.

LB: I want to ask you this: my mother claimed that the Jews in these little villages during the civil war and during the pogroms, used to pray for the Bolsheviks to come because when they came they stopped the killing.

MW: That's right. The tribunal was the Bolshevik tribunal. It wasn't a tribunal from bandits. It was the Bolshevik tribunal that came to clear town a little; make a little peace. I mean, the people should be able to live not in so much fear. And so where they got a hold of the six bandits, they surrounded the little village and brought them to trial, to speak of. And they are the ones that put them against the wall, and they are the one that ordered them to be executed in front of the people. They forced the people from the bazaar to come and witness that. Be a live witness.

LB: The non-Jews?

MW: Everybody.

LB: How did the non-Jews take this execution?

MW: In fact, when he was reading the protocol, the mother of that boy from town, you know, that I remembered, started to cry. You know, her son. So he stopped and asked her to come to him, to the platform. It was a little improvised platform where he was standing and reading it. And he asked her, "Who are you?" She said, "That's my son against the wall. So he said to her in Ukraine, "You should have cried when he was killing the people; when he was killing Jews and all the people. Why didn't you cry then? Now it's a little too late..." I mean, they weren't sentimental. I mean, you couldn't break him down and say, "Well, let him go home." And that's the way it was. They had to be cold-blooded in order to carry out extreme penalty orders.

LB: That was bad times. A non-Jewish Latvian woman was saying that when the Russian soldiers came during the Second World War, the Latvians were terrified. So when she read what my mother said- that they were praying for the Bolsheviks to come - she said that's not the way it was in their town. They were running from the Bolsheviks. So I said that I expect the

Bolsheviks treated or had different feelings toward the Latvians than they did toward these small villagers who were being terrorized by the Whites.

MW: Yeah.

LB: The other point she raised was that there were parties that were not under military control. They called themselves Reds also, but they terrorized anybody. Do you know of that?

MW: Is that the Second World War?

LB: No, I'm still talking about the First. I mean for example, in [Zhivago](#) he mentions that the doctor was abducted by a group of partisans and they called themselves Reds but they would kill anybody.

MW; Well, I have no knowledge of that. What part of Russia did it happen?

LB: I think it was in Siberia.

MW: Well that's in a different world.

LB: But in the Ukraine, this is how it was?

MW: That's right. I have no knowledge that anybody would call themselves Red, Bolsheviks, or whatever it is, and kill people.

LB: Okay, that's what I wanted to know. It's not enough to take (the word) of one person, if you're lucky you get another person that can clear something up or corroborate it.

MW: Yeah, not to my knowledge.

LB: So you're in the middle of these pogroms and they last at least until 1921?

MW: Yes, at least.

LB: And did you manage to survive and to stay in your town?

MW: Yeah, well, that's right. Running to a village or running to a friend's, running to the secret...but we managed to survive. We even managed to survive. We're going into the period where the White Guards start attacking and to Dinekin and Kolchak. We're that area now. And again, just due to the Bug. When the Bolsheviks start attacking them and chasing them back; most of them on the Dinekinses ran to the [Black Sea](#), because from there they figured they'll

reach Turkey, you know. To get to the Black Sea they had to pass our little town. I mean, that was their strategy. They were already not petty larceny bandits. I mean, they were just an organized group to kill Jews, or whatever it is that was organized already in a group fashion. No, I remember, when they reached our town, they didn't come to stay there, just to bypass us. And again, I must come to our drugstore, you know. The windows in the drugstore, in the front were like from ceiling to the bottom, big windows. And they start smashing the windows.

LB: These were Dinekin's men?

MW: Dinekin, yeah. And I mentioned before that we stayed with them in their apartment because they were afraid to be alone, the druggist and his wife. At that time was a [typhus epidemic](#). [Typhoid fever](#). My sister was sick - the older one that passed away- recuperated. My brother was sick but he was after his crisis. He could hardly walk. So, naturally, Mama and Papa would stay with him. Everybody ran. I mean everybody was on his own. And I ran across the street to a little neighborhood house, where there was a small little bungalow house where you feel that nobody would go in there. The clerks in the drugstore ran away too. So, in other words, only my father remained next door in the apartment. And they got in there and they asked my father to give them cocaine or morphine and all that. My father begged them and he pleaded with them: "I'm a tailor. I don't know nothing about drugs. You take whatever you want there." And they wouldn't believe him. So there was a little tube going from one room to the other where they have a little iron stove to heat up. The rooms were too big. There was a tin pipe to make a connection. And naturally, it wasn't one solid piece. It was pieced together like a harmonica, piece after piece. So they told my father, "If you're not going to give us cocaine or morphine, (whatever they asked for, that which my father didn't know what they were talking to him about) we're going to hang you!" So they did. They hung him on that pipe. But the man was 150, 160 pounds. And the tube opened, broke. So he fell down before he lost his breath. And they revived him.

LB: Dinekin's men had already left?

MW: Yeah. But my brother could hardly walk. So he walked over and he was able to come to himself a little. And that's the way. After that he lived very little. I mean, maybe from shock and all that because he wasn't physically strangled that much. But the fear and the shock and all that. But that's the way it was. My father, the tailor, had to take a punishment because he didn't know what they asked him for. And there were dope addicts in that group already. There were big generals or captains of the army with Dinekin, the White Army and we paid the price for it.

LB: What year was that?

MW: That would be in '21, I would think. Between '20 and '21. When the Bolsheviks really took power and start chasing them heavy, when the Dinekinses start leaving Russia. This here rumor of what the Dinekinses done to us in a small town; and they killed a mass, a mass-killing. You know, they killed maybe 150 or 200 dead in our town. It was a mass killing for a small population. It reached Odessa, and they did it in the smaller towns on the way. I mean, we weren't the only one. They didn't pick us. So it reached Odessa, the news what they're doing and on the way over to the Black Sea. And Odessa was known for its tough Jewish boys like we didn't have any. Over there they had all they needed to defend themselves. And there was one of the Jewish mafia they call them. I don't know how they called them in that time...

LB: The Self Defense League.

MW: No, he wasn't, no. He was one that could shake down somebody for some money. He was called [Mischa Japonietz](#). Mischa the Japanese. The Jap, yeah. Jewish boy. So he organized all the Jews, the tough kids, to welcome those Dinekins when they reached Odessa. And he says, "Nothing, no asking nothing." And he was able to see that they'd shoot. All had revolvers or pistols or rifles or whatever. "You see him" - because they were all in uniform - "just shoot, just kill. Don't ask nobody nothing. Just keep killing as many as you can." And that's what they did. And they killed an awful lot of them, those that reached Odessa. And ever since, that Mischa Japonietz became one of the generals in the army. And he was glorified.

LB: In the Red Army?

MW: Yeah. He was glorified. And he died.

LB: What was his name?

MW: Mischa Japonietz. That's the name we knew in the little town.

LB: But you don't know what is Soviet Army name was?

MW: No, no. And he was glorified for his deeds as savior of the Jews. Not as savior of the Jews, he took revenge for what would happen to us. And as much as it was true, it sounds legendary, but it was a fact. And they claimed - the rumors came to us that kids of ten, twelve years - as long as they could hold a weapon said: "Just kill. Don't ask nothing. No questions." And they spotted them. They knew which way they're going to run to reach the Black Sea. And there they welcomed that. And they killed as many as they could reach.

LB: During this time, the civil war period, was the time when at first Lenin was a little lenient about the different republics. He said, "Well, if they want to be independent republics, they can

be,” and so on.

MW: [NEP](#), the New Political Economy.

LB: Was that under NEP, that that started?

MW: Yes, that’s Leninist. [Lenin](#) introduced that.

LB: When did the Ukrainians try to form a separate government?

MW: Under Petlura.

LB: What years?

MW: It must have been between ‘18 and ‘19.

LB: It was just in the middle of the civil war?

MW: Yeah.

LB: Somebody told us that there were Germans in the Ukraine at that time also. Do you know of that?

MW: No, not in our town. Maybe there were, but I mean I was at that time too young to absorb politically what happened two [versts](#) away from town. So, if I make a statement it’ll be just a ridiculous one. And I don’t want to.

LB: During this time, when you could see what was happening, at least in your area, that when the Bolsheviks came in there was some kind of justice for the Jew, and when the Whites came in there was only murder, did you begin to have any feeling for the Bolsheviks?

MW: It would be a natural reaction. As long as I could walk out in the street without fear. I used to sit sometimes... I have to go back to that secret cellar in the drugstore. And there was a little, small little window going out on the property on the lawn where we surrounded, where we used to have the dogs walking around, little chickens walking around. And, as young as I was, I used to spot little dogs passing and little chickens without fear and I said to myself: “Look, look at that. If I could have just that feeling; to walk around without fear like the *hintele*, you know, like the dog. I would be in seventh heaven.”

LB: You know something, that’s exactly what my mother said. She used to wish she was a dog.

MW: That's right. I mean, that was part of life. It's not that I had self-pity. The surroundings, for everybody. I used to say - in Yiddish it's easier, you know.

LB: Say it in Yiddish then.

MW: *Ich hab gevult zein a hintele, arim gein frei.* (I would like to be a little dog, going around freely.) Well, that's what we had to live through. And we lived it through. Here I am.

LB: I'm glad. What were your feelings then? Because, after all, by 1921 Dinekin's men were through, your father had died as a result of this...

MW: He died in '22.

LB: Your brother and sister were already in the United States?

MW: Yeah, yeah.

LB: When did they leave?

MW: I really don't recall. They probably came here (to the U.S.) in '22. At that time they used to run away and they ran into Bessarabia and they were in the *obshchezhitel*. You know, where the group emigrants they used to keep them...in a synagogue, or whatever it is. And they came from town to town until they got contacted. Some of the relatives that were in the States - through an uncle or aunt or whatever... And they took them out and they let them go into...

LB: Why did your brother and sister leave? Because of the pogroms?

MW: Everybody. I could have left, too, if I would run and say nothing. Everybody left. If you could run, save your life, you ran. It wasn't being sentimental or nothing, you just ran to save your life. And I remember that, the feeling of my parents, my father and mother, that they were probably happier, a little relieved that two children were able to escape, to get away. I knew that we were too young, he wouldn't let us run because we were still supervised by Papa, you know. But if he wouldn't die we would stay home. I mean, I wouldn't probably dream already, at that time, in '22, '23, when things settled down under the Bolsheviks.

LB: You were about 13 or 14?

MW: Yeah. When the Bolsheviks came in and we were able to walk in the street and not to be afraid to walk from one corner to the other and not run for a pogrom; like one *shaygetz* would

come and terrorize the city. That didn't happen after that. Already there was control there. So you already living like in paradise.

LB: So your father died in 1922. By that time your brother and your sister were already in the States.

MW: Yeah.

LB: Once he died, you were then free to go. Is that correct?

MW: Yeah, well we notified them (the brother and sister in the U.S.). Although they were here a short time, they hardly made a living. But they know they had to take us. There's no room for us stay there no more? What are we going to do there. We have no father.

LB: What about your mother?

MW: She went with us. Sure. The three of us. That's why when we got stuck in Belgium she was...

LB: Oh, she went ahead. Right.

MW: And I remained there with my sister.

LB: When you came, you came under a regular passport and with regular affidavits and so on?

MW: Yeah. The only thing I had to do is come on one passport with my mother, as a minor, you know.

LB: You finally got to Belgium. Through what route?

MW: All three of us got to Belgium. First we had to go to meet a group, to the ship company that was the [Red Star Line](#). And the office was in [Kiev](#). So we met there with the people, the Red Star Line's passengers from other cities, or whatever it is. And then they sent us - [Riga](#) was already Latvia- so they sent us to a little provincial town Rezhitsa - a province before Riga. And they kept us there for a couple of weeks, I think. And then they moved us to Riga. And we were in Riga in "obshchezhitel", a town where they keep all the emigrants; all the people in transit. We slept in bunks, you know. It was a community center.

LB: What's the root of "obshchezhitel"?

MW: “*zhitel*” is “where you live”.

LB: And what’s “*obshche*”?

MW: “All, everybody”.

LB: So it means like a communal living...

MW: Yeah, for a couple of weeks we were in Riga and from there they sent...

LB: Who is they? Was it [HIAS](#), or was it the [Joint Distribution](#)?

MW: No, it wasn’t HIAS. It was the Red Star Line. We were traveling with legitimate passports and legitimate papers. The Red Star Line had to move us from destination to destination and bring us to the United States.

LB: Was the Red Star Line a Soviet company?

MW: No, no, no. It was a ship company. They still, I suppose have an office in New York today.

LB: Is it a United States company?

MW: I don’t know what it - the main office is United States. It’s like, people come over. There was a White Star Line, Cunard Line. We came with the Red Star Line. It wasn’t a “Red” company. It was Red Star Line. It’s just by coincidence that... And they’re still in existence, I suppose. So from Riga they sent us to [Antwerpen](#). Antwerpen was the seaport where we had to board the ship and go to the States. When we came to Antwerpen we realized we [lost our quota](#). And that’s where we were stuck for three years, my sister and myself. My mother they released sooner, because she was a mother going to a son and daughter.

LB: If you were on the same passport with your mother...

MW: In Antwerp already, the American Embassy, they segregated us. I mean, my mother got a permit to leave and they knew that I’m waiting for my next. I still have the passport. It’s in the box in the bank, but I have it.

LB: If you tried to summarize reasons for your leaving, what was your reason? It was just, almost , to get the hell out of there.

MW: Yeah.

LB: You couldn't say it was anti-Semitism that drove you out.

MW: No no. When we left was no...I mean, anti-Semitism probably is not cured in this way, but that wasn't pressing. It was only that my mother - and I was a young boy - and a sister... And probably when the request came and the offer came: "Come to us in America", I had nothing to say. I said "let's go". It was already a venture that not very many people could have it. And here it was offered to us. I said, after all, I couldn't provide for my mother. My brother said, "We're sending you affidavits, and you go". We go. I wasn't politically motivated to say, "Well, I can't leave. I live under the indoctrination for six years..." My brother and sister said, "You're coming to us." We're going.

LB: Okay.

MW: And even before that- to go to America was a dream. It was most everybody's dream, back home.

LB: Oh, it was?

MW: Yes. America "*ein Kleinigkeit*" (a little something). It was big deal. America was a dream. It was a fantasia for most of them because most of them didn't reach it, only dreamt of it. And here it was offered to us. That's the way I could recall it. I didn't give it any political undertones. All I knew: "*der brieder rief und me geht*".

LB: Brother called and we go.

MW: Brother's calling and we go. That's it. And probably it was fortunate that we did it. It was just a borderline between having a chance to leave and remaining there.

LB: You're saying, if your father had lived...

MW: We stayed there.

LB: He would not have come?

MW: Never, never.

LB: Why not?

MW: Because, it's like here. To a degree, he felt he's a prestigious man. He made his life there. He brought up his children. I mean, what is he gonna go to America? What is he gonna do? I mean that I am just thinking out loud. He never spoke to me about it. Never was a question of leaving. But I imagine that would be his mentality, that would be his philosophy. After all, when my father died he was 63 years old. Here, it's a baby. Over there it was an old man. I never remember my father without a beard. Never. Probably if my father would ever take off his beard, I wouldn't know who he is. Since I grew up, I know "*Der tata hat a burd.*"

LB: Yes.

MW: That's the way it was.

LB: You said to me, and a lot of other Jews have said the same thing: "My father was religious, but he was not a fanatic." What's a fanatic?

MW: I don't think I even mentioned the word "religious". I think I told you that my father was a traditional Jew. Just Jewish through and through. Well, "fanatic". I'll tell you, like the Orthodox Jew would have [payis](#).

LB: Your father did not have payis?

MW: No, no, no, no. My father was a handsome man, to me, I mean. He looked more like Dr. Herzl. And, naturally, he didn't have a beard up to his knees. But he had a beard. As I've said, never knew without; a father without a beard. And had a nice haircut, you know. I never saw him in the house walking around with a yarmulke. Never saw him do anything when at a table to eat or whatever it is, without any. But, as like this here, when he was with his clients or with his workers, he was just like a modern man. That's it. He was dressed nice, had nice clothes.

LB: So a fanatic would be somebody who wouldn't make any concession at all to how the world was changing? Is that what you're saying? That would be your definition?

MW: That's right. I suppose so, yeah. That's more or less. I mean, I know when you live in a small town, most of the people there, even they don't know the definition - they don't know what fanaticism is or the basis of orthodoxism - they follow the trend. That's the way the neighbor does and that's... it seems, I think, my father was revolting... it wasn't revolting. Nobody pressed him or anything. But, he probably lived his own life. I mean, he was a full-fledged Jew.

LB: Yes, I understand.

MW: In all sense of the word. Yontov is Yontov. Shabbos is Shabbos, kosher is kosher. I mean, with moderation. He wouldn't walk around in his atelier with the [tallis kuten](#) with it like I see here.

Like I see the boys here, on Alton Road, going to the yeshiva. I don't say they shouldn't go to the [yeshiva](#), but "*me darf misht gehn*" like this here, and the whole world should see that you have the Shabbos, he goes with a tallis. Young boys, they live here because they have the [new yeshiva](#) here on 10th Street or 12th Street and Alton Road. So some of the youth, Shabbos, they put a tallis on, they put a tallis on all the way down to the floor, walking from way down there. I mean, I don't think it's called for, you know. And with a *mit a yingele*, you know, a little son. Take the *tallis*, let him carry it for you. But if you're so fanatic, keep the tallis in the synagogue. What do you have to carry there and back? I mean, maybe I'm wrong. That's the way I look at it. To me, this is overdone. This is not proving anything. That wouldn't impress me. Let me just cut it short.

LB: I understand. When you were growing up, you played with boys; you had boyfriends and so on. Were your friends all Jewish?

MW: Yes.

LB: Did you have any friends that were not Jewish? After you got to the gymnas(ium), and so on?

MW: No. I knew a couple of boys that were not Jewish, like from school, but I didn't socialize with them to speak of. I remember, during the time of... can I go back to the pogrom time?

LB: Yeah. We're roaming in time.

MW: Where we lived, our side of the street was mostly Jewish and across the street from us were very few Jews and then was already the gentile section. Very few. And one of them that was in school, also older than myself, was in school, used to pass by our house, take horseback riding. We used to go horseback riding bareback. You know, without the saddle. And he passed by my house and I was sitting on the terrace. And he says to me, he knew me, he was actually a neighbor to speak of, plus that I knew him from the school. He says to me: "You wanna..." and he was riding on one horse and one he was holding. In other words, with two horses. And he says to me: "You wanna take a ride, Moishe?" He called me by my first name. I said, "no" for no good reason; not because I had fear. At that time I had no fear of him. But for no good reason I said, "No, I don't." It so happened, and a short while later, he was the one that killed one of my uncles. One of my uncles that the family's now in Toronto. Came to one of the sugar refineries- we had two- you know. So he came to one of the ...

LB: You had two sugar refineries in the family?

MW: Not in the family, no, no. In the area.

LB: Oh.

MW: Yeah, so my uncle, also a tailor, was working around that area. They used to go to somebody's house and make their clothes on the premises there. And there was a little pogrom on the village as I told you. And there was a basin, like a pool around the refinery there. And my uncle didn't know how to save his life, so he ran into that water. And that little *shaygetz* killed him on the spot there. I said to myself later, "It's a good thing I told him that I didn't want to take a ride with him."

LB: Was this during the pogroms? During the civil war time?

MW: Yeah, yeah. It was.

LB: But the time he asked you to go for a ride was not during the civil war?

MW: It was around that time, more or less, but I didn't have no fear. I mean it didn't dawn on me that - after all, how much older could he have been? He couldn't have been too much older, because when the Bolsheviks came and they start making order, they arrested him. They knew that he killed my uncle. But they, even on that...laws under them, I think they couldn't prosecute him because he was a minor. So that means he probably wasn't sixteen years old. So it was probably a difference between a year and two between the two of us. But yet it happened. Killed one of the finest men.

LB: You say your father had worked for all these gentiles. During all these pogroms and all this terror, did any of these people come forward with offers of help?

MW: Yes. I mean help in a respect that it impressed me very much. You know, when we went through the hunger period, when we couldn't buy bread...

LB: When was this? About 1919?

MW: It happened between '18 and '19. You couldn't get no bread. Although by us it wasn't as bad as in the big towns because you could still probably reach a potato or whatever it was. I recall one time we were hungry for bread. You know, bread was the most important thing. We didn't have enough. When somebody would ask me, coming here and struggling to make a living like every emigrant does, struggling, little by little, and it happens that it goes your way a little in something and you make ends meet and you're happy. And they would ask me, "What is

the biggest thing in life that ever happened to you, that left an impression?” I would tell them, “When my father went to his friend, when we didn’t have no bread, and he came back with a bushel of wheat that they gave him that we could go to the mill and grind it ourselves and have bread to bake. At that time we were three people, 4 people; father and mother, sister and myself. It would be for 4 or 5 weeks we would have bread; bake every week a certain amount.

LB: This was a non-Jewish friend?

MW: One of his gentile friends. I said to myself, “this is the most impression that left upon me, is to know that for four weeks my mouth wouldn’t water for a piece of bread.” So he did get help from his friend.

LB: That was in the hunger period. During the pogroms were there any offers for...?

MW: No, no, no.

LB: No?

MW: Not that any of them done any harm to my father or ourselves, but no he would need to go out of town to reach some shelter, whatever. But he didn’t. No we mostly stood around. Stayed home.

LB: It was almost as if these Jewish villages, in the *shtetlach*, you were rooted to that spot.

MW: That’s right.

LB: And you waited just to see what would happen.

MW: That’s right.

LB: You almost took no action on your own.

MW: No, we didn’t.

LB: You just waited to see what was going to hit you next.

MW: No, we didn’t. I mean it’s maybe the shtetl didn’t have enough mature youth to have the courage to resist a pogrom. And pogrom consisted only of 2 or 3 gentile boys that would come and they would terrorize. Or maybe we were just afraid. Because there were other towns that did resist. They did fight back. And when you fight back they have a little more respect for you.

LB: I'm not saying this in a critical sense. I'm just trying to understand. Nobody ran. You didn't run. Only your brother and sister ran. They were able to get out. And the Soviet government put no obstacles in the way of anybody's going.

MW: No, usually most of them that ran at the time when my brother and sister ran they didn't run legitimately...

LB: That was illegal.

MW: They smuggled themselves into a different border. It's not that they had official papers. We left officially.

LB: But you were not hindered either. When you left, you left officially and with the sanction of the Soviet government.

MW: Yes, with the passport and everything.

LB: So at that time the Soviet government was not putting any obstacles in the way?

MW: Not. At that time I would say, as far as our family is concerned, my mother, my sister and myself, what did they need us for, you know? There was an old woman. At that time I was a boy that was not matured yet. It wasn't heaven yet, to live it wasn't too much food anyway. Somebody wants to take them, go.

LB: I see. It's not as if you were a full productive worker that they were losing.

MW: That's right. No, no. I mean, they probably figure they could manage very well without me.

LB: People have raised this over and over again: the Jews didn't want to go in the army. Some Jews went, some apparently even volunteered...

MW: What army?

LB: The Russian Army.

MW: For the Czar?

LB: Right.

MW: Volunteered. It's a hard question to answer. The Jews volunteered to the Czar's army. My father was in the army when he was married already. I think they had a child already. I, again, go back to my father's Judaism. So, he was in the army and they used to be up for exercises 5:00 in the morning. And by the time they got back to the barracks, you know, where they feed them their breakfast, they were all exhausted. So he said, "Everybody would sit down and have their breakfast, and I had to go and *daven* first." So he recalled it, and it was hard. And he couldn't see the minute to be out of there already. He said, "By the time I got through, I almost fainted." Apropos to being Jewish. He wouldn't dare. He knew that he could not go to the table without dovening first.

LB: That's a beautiful example. Just one little story that's from a personal point of view. It isn't even as if someone was beating him or anything.

MW: No, no, that's right. He knew he's Jewish and must *daven*.

LB: Mr. Wax, thank you very much.

MW: My pleasure, my pleasure.